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Nicaraguan Defects

Human Rights Official Given Asylum in U.S.

By George Gedda
Associated Press

An official of Nicaragua's government-operated human rights commission has secretly defected to the United States, accusing Sandinista authorities of refusing to allow his office to investigate most abuses in that country, according to U.S. government documents.

Mateo Guerrero, former executive director of Nicaragua's National Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, told U.S. interrogators that Sandinista officials increasingly view the panel as a tool to improve Nicaragua's image abroad. It was established five years ago as an autonomous government agency.

Guerrero went to Miami four months ago, telling Nicaraguan authorities he wanted to take English lessons, U.S. sources said yesterday. There, he requested and was granted political asylum.

The Associated Press obtained a copy of a four-page U.S. government summary of the story he told U.S. officials. It includes the following allegations:

- The commission, established in 1980 to probe human rights abuses, has gradually come under control of the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry,

which has tried to convert the office into a government propaganda arm.

- The ministry's secretary general, Alejandro Bendana, has monitored commission activities since late 1983. Early this year, he told panel leaders not to investigate allegations of abuses concerning forced relocation of several communities in northern Nicaragua.

- Bendana told two commission officials last January that the panel would help the government establish liaisons with foreign human rights groups to draw international attention to abuses by antigovernment rebels.

"The commission leaders were told to stop investigating any abuse committed by the government of Nicaragua and to concentrate their efforts on the anti-Sandinistas," the summary said.

- When two U.S. lawyers visited Nicaragua last year to investigate abuses by anticommunist rebels, the commission paid their three-month hotel bill and provided office space and transportation.

- Since 1982, commission members have not been permitted to probe prison-system abuses. The Interior Ministry's chief of prisons, Raul Cordon, "has delayed or refused to meet with commission officials and has torn up commission letters in front of the officials without reading them Cordon has rejected all of the com-

mission's requests for the release of prisoners," it said.

- Of nine commissioners appointed in 1983, six place the political goals of the Sandinista government above the panel's human rights interests.

Reached by telephone yesterday, Guerrero said he prefers not to discuss his defection in a phone conversation. In any case, he said, his views were adequately detailed in the summary.

A U.S. acquaintance, speaking on condition that he not be identified, said Guerrero feared for his personal safety because he believed that the Sandinistas might identify him as a counterrevolutionary because of his commission role.

U.S. officials asked the AP not to disclose Guerrero's whereabouts to ensure that his safety is not jeopardized. He was reported to have left Miami about two months ago and is living with relatives elsewhere in the United States.

The officials, who spoke only on condition that they not be identified, said that, before the revolution, Guerrero aided the Sandinista cause by transporting weapons and other equipment.

In April, the Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights, a private U.S. group, indicated in a report on the Nicaraguan justice system that the commission serves a useful purpose.

It said staff members serve an educational role by giving human rights seminars to government officials and publicizing human rights treaties, international conventions and domestic legislation.